

Transcript for Chicago Wilderness Alliance and Green Infrastructure Interview

Nancy Williamson: I'm Nancy Williamson. I work, in my regular job, with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. But I am one of the working members of Chicago Wilderness. And my passion and interest is in sustainability and green infrastructure. I work in the Chicago metropolitan area. I am the co-chair of the Sustainability committee. And underneath that we have the Green Infrastructure Task Force.

Steven Byers: Steven Byers with the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. With regard to Chicago Wilderness, I represent the Commission on the Executive Council. But more interestingly, I serve as the co-chair for the Natural Resource Management Team to highlight the need for restoration and management of green spaces across the Chicago region.

FWS Interviewer Nan Rollison: And for those of our listeners who are not familiar with the term "green infrastructure" – could either of you give me your definition.

Williamson: Chicago Wilderness likes to simplify it and call it 'interconnected lands and waters.' When you go to communities, you generally like to explain that a little broader to say it operates on three scales. One is our 'open space'—our parks and large holdings, our natural areas—that is at the largest scale. And then from that, moving into developments and the green corridors and the open spaces that might link a neighborhood to other neighborhoods, and then finally down to a site-based scale which probably has the most meaning when you're sitting in front of city planners. And those would be how you handle your stormwater, how you treat it as a resource. How you install rain gardens and swales which can also provide corridors leading into the neighborhoods and into their natural spaces beyond.

Byers: I would just like to add that embedded within the Chicago Wilderness region, that spans an area from Wisconsin, through Illinois, to Indiana, and a tiny bit of Michigan—there are areas that are considered of statewide, if not regional, significance. And some of these communities—forests, prairies—are considered of global significance. And these areas exist now as islands in a landscape that's increasingly dominated by people. Where people make a living, and live. And Reed Noss in an article entitled "Protecting Natural Areas and Fragmented Landscapes" relayed that this fragmentation—this process of splitting up large blocks of land into smaller, more separate units is the leading cause of local extinctions of plants and animals. So I, as a biologist, see green spaces and what Nancy has just described—this 'green infrastructure'—as a means to protect and preserve these islands of habitat. Reed Noss also went on to describe that we need to make the islands bigger, provide compatible buffers, and provide for landscape linkages. And I see 'green infrastructure' as a mechanism to all three of those things.

FWS Rollison: So you were talking about the connectivity. It sounds like green infrastructure is also a way, in addition to trees, habitat, wildlife, birds—what we would

call natural resources, it's also a way to protect other resources that our urban citizens are more familiar with such as our drinking water, clean air, things like that ?

Williamson: It's interesting because over the past three or four years, particularly in the Chicago area, and we have a split in the Chicago area. You either drink groundwater, or if you're in the other side of the Fox River, you drink Lake Michigan water. The Fox River runs parallel north and south in the Chicago area. To those who care about groundwater re-charge, there is a realization that open space provides that re-charge--especially our uplands or oak savannahs, are some of what Steven called our globally imperiled ecosystems.

That becomes even more important when you realize we have plenty of rain, but we're dealing with flooding. And so, when you go before a county or a municipality, and talk about handling water as a resource—light bulbs go on. They understand that they can have (groundwater) infiltration, that they can deal with water, that they can have the streams and amenities function properly by doing proper planning.

FWS Rollison: And so this also keeps taxpayer costs down because you're keeping the design natural. By handling the water as naturally as possible ?

Byers: Yes, a good example of that that many of us have looked to is the innovative approach in Milwaukee, at the Milwaukee Sanitary Sewage District—not sure I've got the name right, but it's the agency that is responsible for treating water and releasing it into Lake Michigan. And they have determined that it is far more effective to protect open spaces in the portions of the watershed that funnel down through Milwaukee. And have found it far more effective to acquire lands, maintain them for the processes Nancy just described, (groundwater) infiltration, trapping the water and holding it rather than releasing it through a culvert into the city where it floods the neighborhoods. So, that's an innovative approach and a good example of how 'green infrastructure' compliments the 'gray infrastructure' (buildings/roads), and provides many amenities besides trapping and holding the water and releasing it at slower rates.

FWS Rollison: It's funny, when I think of Chicago, I think of a major U.S. city, lots of people. I don't think of connected green spaces. Can you paint a picture, as the crow flies, of what Chicago Wilderness looks like ?

Byers: Embedded within the Chicago Wilderness region, is a protected landscape that exceeds 350,000 acres—properties owned by the U.S. Forest Service, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the county Forest Preserve districts. And so the people of region are blessed with that framework of natural areas and open space. Those are the building blocks upon which the 'green infrastructure' vision was developed for the Chicago Wilderness region. Moving from north to south, as that crow flies, off to the left and to the east is the Lake Michigan shoreline that defines the Chicago Wilderness region. But then beyond that are the Illinois beach, the dune and swale topography that lies within the Illinois Beach State Park. Looking off to the right would be the Fox River corridor that Nancy has described to you and the Lake County Forest Preserve District

extending down into Cook County, the city of Chicago. Those open space agencies—Forest Preserve Districts, have done a magnificent job of protecting wooded corridors along the Des Plaines River. Even looking further to the west, the same is true for the Fox River. So these major corridors of woods and open spaces that in part define the Chicago Wilderness region and experience. Those open spaces become more rare as you move down toward Chicago. And quite frankly, Chicago is defined as a bustling city, but also with a world-class Lake Michigan shoreline that attracts people. And even there, Mayor Daley and the city leaders have been working to provide a shoreline that allows passive recreation, restoration, and management--increasingly important to birds. Moving to the south, the Calumet region, the wetlands are important. And anchor to the south, the Palos region, 15,000 acres of land protected by the Forest Preserve District.

FWS Rollison: Climate change is a resource issue that federal and state r agencies are trying to get a grip on—what that means, what we think it will mean. In terms of your future planning processes, perhaps in terms of security for your communities, security for water resources, are you incorporating climate change projections in your planning processes?

Byers: Well, in regard to Chicago Wilderness, climate change is one of four strategic initiatives . And so with regard to that, Chicago Wilderness has put together their own climate change guidelines. And then staff from The Field Museum and other resource professionals have met several times now to look at what this means in terms of management of our natural resources that currently exist within the Chicago Wilderness region. And also, with regard to climate change, the Fish and Wildlife Service has really stepped out in front on that as well. And we show how our landscape connections which orient north and south, resonate with some of the specific items in your 5-step Action Plan for climate change that has been published by the Fish and Wildlife Service. So we're using and showing how some of the goals and objectives of Chicago Wilderness resonate with the Service's Climate Action Plan.

Williamson: And our ' green infrastructure' plan --- we were very excited to see your Landscape Conservation Cooperatives movement because our green infrastructure plan works very well with--played right in to the climate change portion--- so we see the necessity of having those hubs and that link in order to accommodate what is seeming to be projected for climate change. And, we are a four-state boundary in our green infrastructure--we stretch into Wisconsin and around to Michigan. And we see that we are going to have to be linking up hopefully with Fish and Wildlife and those Landscape Conservation Cooperatives to make those linkages in the future.

Byers: And it's those linkages that allow the movement corridors for plants and animals to respond to pressures exerted by climate change.

FWS Rollison: Chicago Wilderness has worked with the Fish and Wildlife Service's Conservation Planning Assistance staff. What sorts of technical assistance are you getting from them ?

Byers: The Fish and Wildlife Service has been a real viable partner in protecting resources in the region. Beyond that, there is the Barrington office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Chicago metro area. And they provide personnel and expertise that have been an integral part of the Chicago Wilderness to promote biodiversity and open spaces across the region.

FWS Rollison: Well, Nancy, Steve, we really want to thank you for talking to us today, and we wish you all the very best and look forward to continuing to work with your organization.

Byers: Well, thank you for your interest, and the continued interest and support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.